



Tiscali volunteered to visit the Tatra mountains of Slovakia with Biosphere Expeditions, to monitor the critically endangered chamois and predators such as wolves and bears. After daily 10km treks through dense pine forest and mountain terrain and a brief encounter with the local bear population, Kyley Chapman lives to tell the tale.

[Watch the video blog of the expedition >>](#)

### Kyley's Highlights

- Spotting two bears, chamois, red deer, golden eagles and numerous other birdlife in its natural habitat.
- Admiring the tremendous scenery and crossing into territory from within the Land Rover that would otherwise have not been accessible.
- Hiking for hours on end through off-the-beaten-track mountain and forest habitat, that hadn't been explored for months or maybe even years.
- Working with our fantastic and enthusiastic scientist, Slavo, who was passionate about wolves, bears, chamois and the Tatra mountain region.
- Early 7.30am starts, long days and lots of satisfaction shared with my team members over dinner in the nearby hotel restaurant every evening.



### Night Walk

We awoke at 3.30am fully clothed, and as quietly as possible crept out of the dormitory that slept around 30 people. Tip-toeing down the creaky stairs to the common room, where we had slurped our soup and drank Slovakian rum brandy the night before, we put on our walking boots, hat, gloves and waterproofs

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ready for the hike ahead. Melanie our expedition leader was already up and outside of the small mountain hut which had been our base for an observation night on the hills, trying to put breakfast together. Attempting to lay breakfast in the cold dark of night for nine people isn't too easy, so with just a munch on some rice crackers, a banana and a gulp or two of water I was finally awake and prepared to start my climb.

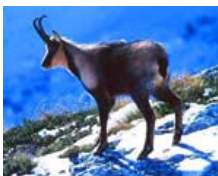


### Tatra Mountain Sunrise

Separated into groups, myself, Jane from Ireland, Dave from England and Emmanuel from France took the steep climb from the small hut in Durkava to the top of the ridge high up on the Slovakian Tatra mountain range. It was bitterly cold, and the mist was thick and heavy, but we knew the hike would be worth

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it when we got to the top to watch the sun rise. Our pace was slow and steady, occasionally stopping to catch our breath. Visibility was low and the wind was high. We were determined and prepared and very well wrapped up. After much puffing and panting we arrived at the top just in time. The sun burnt through the mist to reveal a tremendous view of the mountain range. Gold and red illuminated the sky and clouds blew speedily across the valley. The top of the ridge is a special place and being enveloped in such a powerful wind and watching the ever changing colours of the mountain range, was both thrilling and emotive. After the sun had risen, the mist fell once again and our vision was limited to just 30 metres. With seven hours walking ahead of us to reach Chopok in the West of the mountain region, we had to stay determined and in high spirits. But with such good company and one objective, to spot and record the movements of the highly endangered chamois, we knew we'd be fine.



### Chamois In The Mist

We'd been walking in poor visibility for over four hours when we first sighted chamois. So far in the distance, it was difficult to tell the difference between the chamois and a mountain rock. Excitedly, Emmanuel, the wildlife photographer on the expedition prepared all of his

photographic equipment only to capture a blurry image far in the distance. After much debate on whether to stay, watch and wait, or to continue further, we decided that even if the mist did drop the chamois would probably have moved on. It was another twenty minutes of walking that took us higher up the ridge. Then, from nowhere, we witnessed a magical sight. Only 20 metres away, there in front of us was a herd of around 15 chamois. Cautious but unnerved, the chamois crossed the rocky path ahead of us and occasionally stopped to observe us! Despite the faint silhouettes the group created in the mist, we could identify at least two baby animals and some fully grown adults. It was only 8am in the morning and we were proud to say that we'd witnessed 20% of the entire chamois population. Mystical and magical they appeared before, disappearing in the distance.



#### Tools Of The Expedition

Biosphere Expeditions is an eco-friendly conservation project with a difference. Although fully supported by our expedition leader Melanie, our scientist Slavo and of course my fellow conservationists, you need to be proactive, enthusiastic and genuinely concerned about our environment and planet. On the 10 day conservation project to Slovakia, I was fully briefed on how to use navigation equipment, how to spot bear, wolf, lynx and other animal tracks and scats (otherwise known as poo) and record my findings. I also learnt about the natural environment and endangered species in the region and possible predators. Together as a group we worked towards the primary goal of obtaining as much research as possible for Slavo, our scientist, to assess and report. This was done by trekking long and sometimes arduous routes that weren't always on the map. Thank goodness for the satellite navigation, compass and radio! Many of the walks began at start points not accessible to the general public or in fact by any particular footpath. We reached such remote destinations thanks to the support of Land Rover and the two vehicles dedicated to our project as part of Land Rover's global conservation sponsorship programme. Much of the fun started at the beginning of the day; bundling into the Land Rovers and driving off road over meadows and through the odd stream. Of course, conservation is the ultimate goal of the expedition, so we were careful to minimise any damage done by our driving. Maximum care for the environment was taken at all times on the entire project and whilst in the vehicle.



#### Big Brown Bears In The Woods

Safety is at the forefront of any expedition. I was, however a little alarmed at our introductory briefing when Melanie explained the risk factors. Although there was little risk of anything particularly harmful to worry about apart from sunstroke and dehydration, bears had been promoted from low risk to medium risk as there had been seven attacks on humans in the last eight months. None-the-less, ever resourceful, Melanie explained what we should do if we stumble on a big brown bear in the woods. We shouldn't maintain eye contact as this could enrage the bear. We should keep the bear in our vision and keep still and straight so that we can assess the situation and not look afraid. We shouldn't try and stroke the bear if it comes close to sniff and pat you, which of course if very unlikely, but we should get face down on the ground with elbows stuck out either side in case one tries to roll you around. And what of the other predators? Luckily the wolf is very shy and won't come anywhere near humans and it's rare to see lynx tracks, let alone the cat in the flesh. Golden eagles aren't interested in flying off with anything larger than a marmot (large guinea pig), so apart from the bears, I felt fine...



#### A Brief Encounter With Bears

On one particular day, we stayed in the lower forest and wooded area of alpine and meadow, sheltered from the bad weather on the higher plains. Paired with David, a university student studying zoology, we headed off on our route, which for a change consisted of a good pathway and little climbing. Thinking I had an easy day ahead of me apart from ducking under and stepping over a few forested trees, I relaxed and enjoyed the smell of fresh pine and the tranquillity of the densely wooded area. It was suddenly that we were halted in our path by the sound of vegetation being rustled in the slope to our right. Standing still, we studied the area hard. Searching for something big and a little too close for comfort was thrilling, but very unnerving at the same time. Within seconds of scanning the area, two big wild bear faces popped up

same time. Within seconds of scanning the area, two big wild bear faces popped up above meadow grass and looked in our direction. Big furry faces, with cute round tufty ears and a button nose positioned perfectly in the centre of their muzzle stared straight at us. Thankfully, they turned on their hind legs and disappeared higher up into the vegetation. David was frozen in disbelief and surprise. All I could think to do was to grab hold of him and walk slowly backwards for fear of the bears coming back to investigate us further. The rule of lying down flat on the ground with my elbows sticking out had completely left my memory cells in the sheer surprise! After allowing my heartbeat to calm down we radioed Melanie to tell her our news. 'You lucky things...' she exclaimed whilst I was still recovering from the whole experience. On discovering our find, Slavo was very excited. 'How long did you observe the bears?' he asked enthusiastically... 'One minute? Five minutes?'. We felt sad to share with him that our experience had lasted only seconds, but relieved at the same time that it wasn't much longer as bears are known to be unpredictable within 20 metres of human beings.



#### Variety In The Forest

All hikes on the project were different. We varied our walking groups according to who felt like doing what on the day. Sometimes I walked on a path, other times I walked up or down stream on no footpath with just stepping stones and slushy quagmire. Most days we met no-one on our walk. One time we met illegal blueberry pickers and that was it! On the odd occasion I slipped and had to grab hold of the long tough meadow grass to catch myself and witnessed a couple of other members of the group falling into bushy pine shrubs, all of which ended up in laughter and nothing more serious. The air in the mountains is fresh and sweet, and whilst exploring the alpine forest there's always plenty of raspberries and blackberries to snack on as well as a tasty lunch, made by our own fair hands every morning.

Each day of the project was a new adventure for all of us. Everyone in the group was well travelled and eager to take on whatever the day threw at us. International and ranging from 18 to around 60, we were all eager to swap stories of previous travels and our findings and encounters of each day at evening time around the dinner table. We all worked well as a group and supported each other on the walks and with our research and findings.

I'd never thought of Slovakia as a destination to spend my holiday and I'd certainly never imagined myself on the hunt for bear and wolf poo. However, the experience was amazing and I'd recommend it to anyone that wants to make a difference and contribute to a serious environmental project managed by passionate and intelligent professionals. You need to have a decent level of fitness and be happy to get out into the wilderness come rain or shine. At the end of my time working with Slavo and the rest of the team I felt thrilled that I had contributed something worthwhile to the research and proud of my efforts off-the-beaten track. My experience was something that I will definitely not forget and a unique and fantastic opportunity.

#### Getting There And Away

Find out more about Biosphere Expeditions at [www.biosphere-expeditions.org](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org), email [uk@biosphere-expeditions.org](mailto:uk@biosphere-expeditions.org) or telephone +44-870-4460801.

To find out more about Land Rover's Fragile Earth programme and global conservation sponsorship programme visit [www.landrover.com](http://www.landrover.com).

Other expeditions include:

- Azores: whales, dolphins & turtles
- Peru Amazon: monkeys & macaws
- Namibia: cheetahs, leopards, brown hyenas
- Altai mountains: snow leopards & total solar eclipse
- Plus more...

Prices start from £990 for the Slovakian Tatra mountain chamois, wolves & bears expedition. Don't forget to mention Tiscali when you get in touch!